

"Gothic to Goth"

"Gothic to Goth": Romantic Era Fashion and Its Legacy," at the Wadsworth Atheneum looked at the lingering influences of the dominant imaginative mode of the nineteenth century through the specific lens of costume. The exhibition includes several paintings—including Frederic Church's *Niagara Falls* (1856) and two by Thomas Cole, *The Present* and *The Past* (both 1838), featuring medieval-style castles improbably if picturesquely set down in Hudson River School scenery. Museum-founder Daniel Wadsworth was a friend and patron of these artists, committed to the cause of Romanticism.

But the majority of works on display were clothes, which catalogue-author Lynne Zucek Bassett examined for clues to shifting tastes. The historicism of the period surfaces in crenellated collars, mimicking castle parapets, and in slashed sleeves with chiffon pulled through in puffs, openly alluding to Renaissance fashion. Ruffs—a stylistic flourish exploited by portraitists from



Cashmere Woman's
Mourning Dress
c. 1857–60

COURTESY WADSWORTH
ATHENEUM
HARTFORD,
CONNECTICUT

the Tudor era through Van Dyck—reappeared, although critics justly lampooned the Elizabethan hats perched on elaborate Victorian sausage curls. A good example of creative time travel is a dress (c. 1840) made out of eighteenth-century fabric.

A cashmere Woman's Mourning Dress (c. 1857–60) illustrates the themes of emotionalism and sentimentality, although the accompanying examples of mourning jewelry made with human hair introduce the Victorian obsession with death. Modern viewers may find this material off-putting and morbid, preferring the straightforward macabre of Edgar Allan Poe or the haunted tales of Nathaniel Hawthorne. But the Victorians integrated death into daily life. Those who grew up in the South, as I did, may remember leafing through photo albums in which, well into the twentieth century, nicely dressed families posed next to a beloved's tombstone. One of the great cultural inventions of the nineteenth century was New York City's Central Park, a man-made environment celebrating nature. Central Park's precursor was Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn (established 1838), which quickly became fashionable not only as a burial site but as a setting for family outings, with fresh air, scenic

views and a sculpture park of statuary and monuments. Alexander Jackson Davis, one of the great promoters of the Central Park project, was co-architect of the first Wadsworth Atheneum, executed in Gothic Revival style.

American Romanticism is a complex subject, further complicated when set in the context of global



Jean-Paul Gaultier
Vampire Suit, 1998

COURTESY WADSWORTH
ATHENEUM
HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT



Sarah Burton, for the House of Alexander McQueen, Coat dress and belt, 2012

COURTESY WADSWORTH ATHENEUM
HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

Romanticism. Rooted in the belief that the United States represented a New Eden, the Kindred Spirits of the Hudson River School were wary of certain aspects of the international movement, such as the irreligious zest of Percy Bysshe Shelley and company. Pointed arches and piety were happily borrowed from the Middle Ages; popery and the kind of extravagant medievalism practiced by D.G. Rossetti and his circle were avoided. (A wider view of the exhibition subject would encompass the Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic movement revolution in women's dress, which did away with corseting in favor of

simple, flowing, often beautifully decorated gowns.)

The clothes in the main body of the exhibition—which are very well photographed in the catalogue, with a wealth of detail that reveals meticulous craftsmanship—are, for the most part, rather prim. An exception is *Dress with Evening Bodice* (c. 1850), in sumptuous blue-black silk with a black lace shawl. It's easy to imagine this garment worn by one of Ingres' curvaceous, alabaster-skinned society beauties.

There is nothing prim, however, in the Legacy section of the exhibition. In the catalogue, Bassett mentions the Romanticism of the 1960s, seen in flower-print hippie dresses. Romantic self-presentation is one of the building blocks of rock-and-roll stage presentation. Sartorial choices are rooted in a complex tangle of artistic, philosophical and social concerns. How we dress can

communicate allegiance to a particular worldview: The advertising executives of the *Mad Men* television series and the flower children and the neo-Byronic rebel-rocker may have co-existed in a temporal field, but they belonged to distinct tribes, easily identifiable. When we look at a nineteenth-century portrait, we should be sensitive to stylistic clues. In Thomas Sully's *Daniel Wadsworth* (1807), the subject's loosely tied cravat and tousled hair signal his romantic sensibility.

Haute couture takes fashion to a new level, as an exercise in imagination untrammelled by everyday practical issues. That characteristic fits several pieces in the exhibition. The Parisian couturier Hélène Hayes's *Evening Gown* (1986) would turn heads in any century. The slashed puff sleeves recall the Renaissance. The polonaise-style skirt refers to the eighteenth century. Yet the entire black-velvet-and-pale-rose-silk dress looks timeless, bridging the gap between vintage and modern.

A *Dress* (2007) by Alexander McQueen does not replicate period details; a long, cap-sleeved, high-necked sheathe in black velvet striated with satin piping in an abstract light-burst-pattern, the dress is nonetheless deeply Romantic in conception. McQueen's 2007 collection was named *In Memory of Elizabeth Howe, Salem, 1692*; an ancestor of McQueen's who was one of the victims of the witch trials. Jean-Paul Gaultier's *Vampire Suit* (1998)—although it used modern materials such as black denim and nylon—pays overt homage to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and other Romantic horror literature.

It was good to see the contemporary Steampunk movement acknowledged. This playful mash-up of do-it-yourself Victorian invention and Victorian style was represented by a *Time Lady* suit (2013) by Nightwing Whitehead. In grey fabric with a swirl pattern, the lady-like walking suit was inspired by the British television series *Dr. Who*, where the character wearing it might sport goggles and carry a ray-gun. Here, the ensemble was accessorized with Beverly Coniglio's *Bee-Baby Necklace* (2015), combining a tiny ceramic doll's head, rhinestones and an antique pocket watch.

Artistic style does not evolve along a straight line, ever pushing forward. Cycles and revivals are crucial, as they are, more obviously, in fashion. This lively show demonstrates how art and fashion interact, it is a line of inquiry worth pursuing. "Goth to Gothic" was on view March 5–July 10, 2016, at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut.

—Gail Leggio